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Just seven feet tall

The enemy is 10 feet tall. This is the way soldiers feel before the fight; it is also the way governments sell their defence budgets to public opinion. Natural, maybe, to try to avoid underestimating the opposition. But too much of it has three kinds of bad results: (1) money is spent on the wrong forces and weapons, and sometimes too much of it is spent altogether; (2) it creates an "I give up" attitude among those who don't fancy 10-foot enemies; and (3) it drives sceptics who never believe governments to argue that the enemy may in fact be only three feet tall.

One of the big debates of 1976 is about how serious a danger the Soviet rearmament of the past few years poses to the west. It will be a major issue at next month's Republican convention in Kansas City: Ronald Reagan seems to claim that Russia has pushed the United States into second-power status; President Ford denies it. Trying to find the truth means avoiding two opposite extremes. The famous "missile gap" of the early 1960s led the Americans to spend billions of dollars (and develop some very sorry weapons in the process); later on it was found never to have existed at all. At the other extreme the pooh-poohing of Hitler's rearmament in the 1930s delayed some western defence programmes until it was almost too late.

Unvarnished truth about the east-west balance of power is hard to come by, for several reasons. First, the most accurate figures are held by national intelligence services, and if governments do not actually lie they tend to release this information with large pinches of intellectual dishonesty—selectively, and with misleading definitions—in order to make their parochial points. Second, the debate is usually about numbers, whereas quality matters too and the side that has fewer of a given thing may also have better. Third, people tend to read the numbers wrong. They match tanks against tanks and submarines against submarines, instead of tanks against anti-tank defences and submarines against anti-submarine forces.

No absolute truth, then; but a reasonable approximation is possible. *The Economist* takes six main indicators to make a balanced picture.

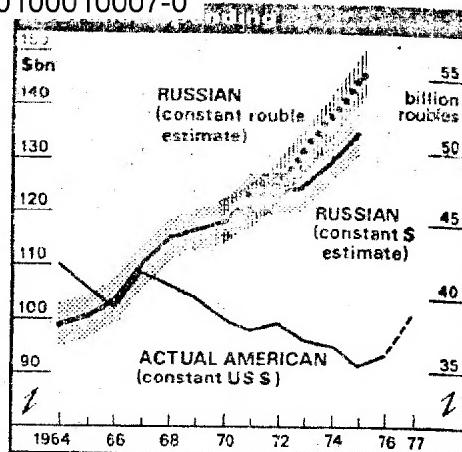
I. Money. Western defence budgets are fairly well known and detailed. The Russian one is grossly obfuscated by

secrecy, and what is known about it has been the subject of a lot of nonsense on both sides of the western debate. Russian spending can be measured in either roubles or dollars. The rouble estimate measures the burden on the Russian economy; the dollar estimate compares the Soviet effort with the American one.

There are several different western estimates of the rouble figure. The CIA, which puts most effort into getting it right, has recently started to take another look at its previous calculations, among other reasons, because it has begun to think that Soviet defence production, once thought to be much more efficient than the civilian sector, isn't so hot after all. But, despite the variation among these western estimates, most of them now show that rouble spending is steadily increasing, even after allowing for inflation, and that it consumes a larger proportion of the Russian gross national product—between 12% and 17%—than in any major western country. The main reason for this seems to be Soviet spending on several new strategic nuclear missiles, on research and development, and on new aircraft.

The dollar estimates are made not by applying an exchange rate to the rouble figures, but by costing the Russian military establishment as if it were produced in the United States. This exercise has, if anything, even more pitfalls than the rouble one. Contrary to what some of its critics believe, however, the CIA does not handle the biggest item, manpower costs, by simply attributing American pay levels to the whole Soviet army: it uses a different (and secret) system, designed to give a fairer picture.

After making every possible allowance for error, Russia still seems to spend a

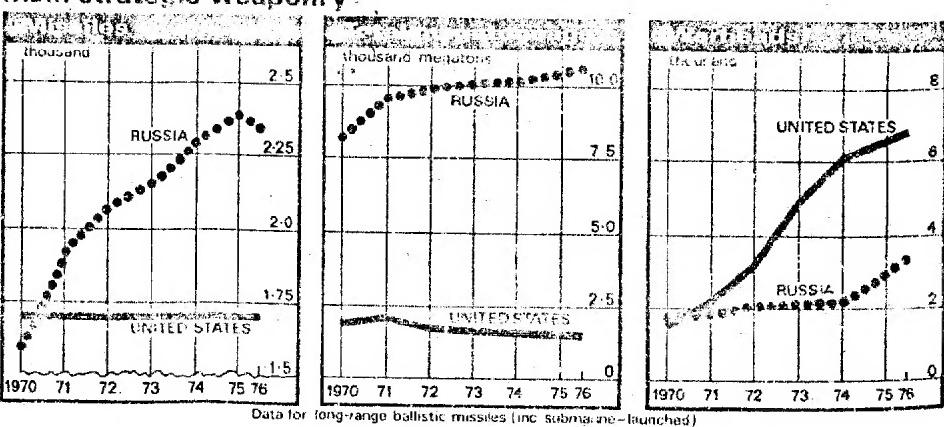


lot more on defence than the United States does. This is not surprising: Russia's forces are much larger, and its recent advances have been mainly in technology, which is relatively much more expensive for the Russians than for the Americans. Moreover, the gap has been widening in recent years. But the widening is not as dramatic as Mr Reagan and his friends think, and may be about to stop: American spending seems to be starting a kick upwards. Verdict on the budget front from the west's point of view: not good, but about to get a bit less bad.

2. Nuclear weapons. It is in strategic nuclear weaponry that Russia has made the biggest gains on the west over the past few years. The Salt I agreements of May, 1972, allowed the Russians larger numbers of larger missiles than the Americans. The United States compensated for this by better technology—greater accuracy and smaller warheads, a combination which meant that it could put several independently-targetable re-entry vehicles (Mirs) on a single missile. But now Russia has started to deploy its own Mirs.

While the United States still has a commanding lead in missile warheads (and an overwhelming one in manned bombers and their loads) this will

Main strategic weaponry



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certainly shrink—and could disappear—as the Russians continue to deploy Mirv's on their bigger and more numerous missiles. Moreover, the ageing B-52s which make up the bulk of America's manned bomber force are a questionable asset in view of Russia's vast and effective air defence system. And the Russians are producing a new bomber of their own, codenamed Backfire by Nato, which can reach most of the continental United States and penetrate its feeble anti-aircraft defences at supersonic speeds.

The United States, with a little help from Britain and France, still has enough nuclear weapons to avoid the ultimate threat—a disarming Soviet first strike. But the west's security against instant nuclear disablement is not nearly so pronounced as it was a few years ago; and the margin promises to get narrower before the next generation of American weapons—the Trident submarine, the B-1 bomber and the long-range cruise missile—come into operation in the 1980s.

3. Manpower. The number of Russians in uniform is increasing while the armed services of the United States are shrinking. Most of the Russian gains have been in the navy, the strategic nuclear forces and the air defence forces (especially those facing China). The Soviet army has been essentially the same size since 1967, and has kept about the same number of its troops deployed in central Europe.

The Russian army is enormous, but perhaps not excessive considering that it has to face China as well as Nato, and given the dubious reliability of its allies. The Nato ground forces in Europe and Turkey (which include only about a fifth of all the American ground strength) total over 2m men; the Russian army, including the part facing China, has 1.8m (not counting the large number of border guards). It is by no means clear that the other Warsaw pact countries can be added on to the Russian total as Nato Europe's forces are to

Fighting ships*

	United States					Soviet Union				
	Total 1976	1971-75	Number built 1966-70	1961-65		Total 1976	1971-75	Number built 1966-70	1961-65	
Aircraft carriers	14					2				
Cruisers	27	36	38	48		35	24	19	14	
Destroyers/ large frigates	172					106				
Small frigates (under 3,000 tons)	2	0	0	2		109	8	38	37	
Nuclear attack submarines	65	20	27	12		80	17	25	34	
Diesel attack submarines	10	0	0	0		180	10	24	65	

*Does not include amphibious ships, auxiliaries or ballistic missile submarines

America's. The six East German divisions would probably fight as well as the Russians, but not the rest.

Quality? Russian soldiers are tough and well trained. Most of them are conscripts, but they serve for longer periods than most of Nato's men. The quality of the Nato forces is uneven. The British are probably, man for man, the best soldiers in central Europe, but the worst equipped of the major armies there, particularly in modern anti-tank weapons and helicopters. The German army is the most potent force of all, and has improved markedly in the past three years in both discipline and training. The American soldiers are at least as good, and well kitted out, but there are fewer than half as many of them.

Judgment on the manpower numbers game: not as bad as it sometimes seems—thanks to China (but will that last?).

4. The navies. The most common misconceptions about the east-west balance are that the Russians have passed the west in naval power, have nothing but new ships, and are still growing. True, there was a rapid Russian naval expansion in the 1960s, followed by a contraction in the number of American warships. However, the American decrease was the result of a conscious decision to get rid of a lot of old ships and replace them with fewer new ones. And as the table above shows, the United States has out-produced Russia in every category of warship, except diesel submarines and very small frigates, for the past 10 years, and its fleet is now the more modern.

It is now the Russians' turn to contract: the average age of Russia's warships, in particular its diesel-powered submarines, suggests that it will be scrapping more ships than the United States in the next few years. And its shipbuilding programme shows signs of levelling off, whereas the Americans are trying to increase theirs.

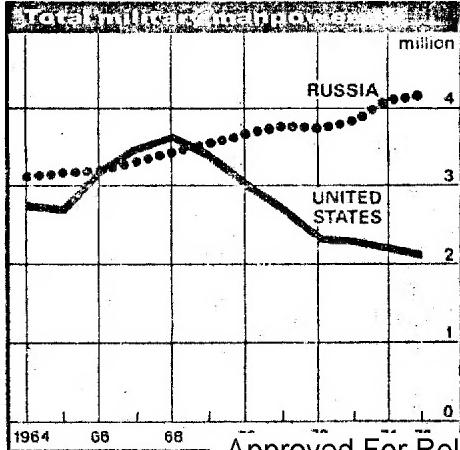
But the American-Russian warship

navies of the other Nato countries are stable in size, are slowly being modernised, and add a good deal to American naval strength, whereas the navies of Russia's allies are small and inefficient. Against this has to be set the vulnerability of the American aircraft carriers—the most potent conventional weapon system yet devised by man, with an awesome firepower that dwarfs anything the Russians have. But there are only 14 of them, and it is a serious question whether they could survive long in areas infested by Russian submarines.

The sheer size of Russia's submarine fleet is the most frightening thing about its navy. The Russian submarines are opposed by a wide range of Nato anti-submarine weaponry, including a portion of America's nuclear attack submarine force but a lot of other things as well. This system is fairly effective against Russia's diesel submarines (which have to recharge their batteries noisily every few days, and can thus be located relatively easily) but ineffective against modern nuclear submarines. This is the big question mark over a naval picture which is otherwise better than most people have been led to think.

5. Air power. Unlike the navies, where there has been too much fretting over the growth of Soviet strength, Russia has recently been catching up with the west in the air almost unnoticed.

In straight numbers the two alliances are about equal, with about 6,000 tactical aircraft each. But in the past the west always used to be miles ahead in quality—its aeroplanes were tougher and more manoeuvrable, had much longer range and better weapons and electronics, and were flown by better trained pilots including a lot with Vietnam combat experience. Most of the Warsaw pact's aircraft have been very short-range fighters, the older ones being given the job of attacking targets on the ground.



The balance in the air

	Tactical fighter-bombers			Strategic interceptors	Overall total*
	Fighters	Strike/attack	Total		
United States	1,720	2,100	3,820	315	4,135
Allies	830	1,130	1,960	680	2,640
Nato total	2,550	3,230	5,780	995	6,775
Russia	1,200	2,800	4,000	2,650	6,650
Allies	1,500	500	2,000	0	2,000
Warsaw pact total	2,700	3,300	6,000	2,650	8,650

*Does not include reconnaissance, electronic warfare, trainer, tanker or support aircraft

began to change when several new Russian aircraft began to be deployed. Three in particular are worrying: the SU-15, called Flagon by Nato, the Mig-23 Flogger and the SU-17 Fitter C. These are fighter-bombers of technical excellence and good range, which can operate effectively at night, fire long-range anti-aircraft missiles, and attack ground targets as well. Then in 1975 the SU-19 Fencer appeared, a swing-wing beauty which is probably the first Russian fighter-bomber designed primarily for ground attack. Several hundred of these new aircraft are now in service.

These new aeroplanes are the technical equal of most models that Nato now uses, although Nato still has more of the good ones: the F-4 Phantom in particular. Presumably Russia will now concentrate on producing more of its new aircraft, retire its vintage ones of Korean-war technology, and start re-equipping its allies, rather than producing any more surprises right away. It has made its spurt to catch up with western quality; now it has to build the quantity.

By the time it does, however, the west should be making its next technological leap forward. Next spring the American air force will start deploying its super-fighter, the F-15 Eagle, in Europe; in 1980 the United States and some of its European allies will start using the smaller, and in many respects even more modern, F-16. Either of these can fly circles around anything the Russians have. In 1980, too, Britain, Germany and Italy will be flying the MRCA Tornado, which promises to be an excellent attack aircraft, the world's second truly all-weather one after the F-111.

Three uncertainties remain, any of which could upset this fairly comfortable prospect. If Russia pushes its production up fast enough, it would overtake the west in numbers of modern jets some time in the early 1980s. If Nato fails to buy an airborne early warning aircraft, its air defence system will get out of date rapidly. And if the United States decides not to build more than a token few B-1 strategic bombers, the Russians could gradually increase their numbers of interceptors, thus

to general duties in central Europe, tipping the balance there considerably.

6. Tanks are the most important ground weapons, and here Russia has a tremendous superiority. Its total inventory is about 40,000, and its current production is estimated at over 2,000 a year, twice that of the United States. The main Russian tank is the T-62, which is fast, agile and carries a 115mm smoothbore gun that is the hardest hitting tank gun in the world, better even than the British Chieftain's 120mm rifled gun, unquestionably the best in Nato (also the rarest; there are only around 600 in continental Europe). Nevertheless, the T-62 is by most measures, including the long-range accuracy of its gun, inferior to Nato's modern tanks.

And the trend in tanks seems to favour the west. The newest Russian one, the T-72, is not much more than a mildly modernised T-62, which was being produced in the early 1960s. The United States and Germany have built prototypes for a new generation of tank which will be far more mobile and better armoured—and probably have more firepower too—than anything the Russians are even thinking about. These new tanks will start appearing in the early 1980s. In the meantime the United States has recently doubled its tank production—up to maybe 100 a month by early next year—and is moving towards an inventory of 14,400 (a third of Russia's).

Except for Britain, Nato also has good anti-tank defences. High-speed mine-laying devices are beginning to appear. Light but effective precision-guided infantry weapons are available in large numbers on the central front. This year the United States started deploying to Europe its TOW wire-guided missile mounted on a Cobra helicopter, probably the most effective tank killer in the world. The next step will be the arrival next year of the A-10 aeroplane—a heavily armoured twin-jet aircraft, almost a flying tank, literally designed around its gun: a rapid firing 30mm machine-gun. The A-10 has demonstrated in tests that it can turn a modern

So where does all this leave the balance of armed strength? There is no all-out "arms race". Each side is responding to the other's advances in particular fields, but not frantically. The present trend favours the Warsaw pact in some things, the west in others—provided (and it is a big if) public opinion does not make the Nato countries chop down their present defence plans. Three general points emerge:

First, the Americans' allies are much more important to America than Russia's are to it. This is true of Nato's naval forces and tactical aircraft, particularly true of its ground forces, and true also of nuclear forces, where Russia has no help at all. The temptation to let big brother carry the load, a course of action not open to Russia's allies, could therefore destroy the Nato alliance.

Second, the most worrying recent development is Russia's impressive ability to overhaul the west in high-technology weapons—such as tactical aircraft, where the west's old advantage in quality has been lost for the time being. But the west still has the technological capacity to jump ahead again, and the industrial base to build up numbers rapidly if it has to.

Third, however, this reserve of western superiority may not apply to the most dangerous area of all, nuclear weaponry. Recent Russian advances here have added quality to an already large quantitative lead, and Russia is rapidly deploying its new weapons. The west—which means basically the United States—seems unsure of how to counter this. Some Americans are willing to bargain away their trump cards—especially the new cruise missiles—in the still undecided second round of Salt missile talks.

To sum up: the effort to stop Russia from becoming the world's strongest power is going better than the pessimists say, worse than the optimists would like to believe; and the effort will have to be kept up for a long time yet.

